

By Reps. Lee Terry and Paul Broun

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In two short years, the Obama administration has managed to exert partial control over our nation's health care system, our automobile industry and Wall Street — and now it wants to control what you can and can't feed your children.

Within the 2009 Democratic omnibus bill, the federal government tasked selected agencies (including the Department of Agriculture, the Federal Communications Commission and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) with developing nutritional guidelines for foods and beverages marketed to children ages 2 to 17.

The group, dubbed the Interagency Working Group, released its preliminary guidelines this summer, sparking outrage in the food industry. Under the guidelines, companies would be able to market and promote to children ages 2 to 17 only foods that supposedly make a meaningful contribution to a healthful diet, while working to minimize the consumption of foods that have a negative effect on weight or health — specifically saturated fat, trans fat, sodium and added sugars.

We believe the proposed guidelines are too broad and far-reaching. If adopted, the proposal would prevent marketing of many types of foods that should be encouraged in the healthy, balanced diets of children.

For example, American favorites such as Honey Nut Cheerios, Cheez-It, Barnum's Animal Crackers, peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches and even celery and bottled water couldn't be marketed or advertised to children in any manner. Bottled water would not meet the marketing guidelines because it does not contribute "significantly" to nutritional requirements. Close to 90 percent of products most commonly consumed would not qualify to be marketed to that age group if these recommendations go into effect and are enforced.

Even worse, the food industry would have to stop all community partnerships because this would be considered marketing to children. We would no longer see Godfather's Pizza as the national sponsor of Boys Town, Pizza Hut's national reading incentive program "Book It!", General Mills' "Box Tops for Education" or even the Ronald McDonald House. All of these programs greatly benefit communities across the country. The proposed guidelines even contradict current federal nutrition program guidelines, such as the Women, Infant & Children program.

Additionally, there is no scientific study to back up the argument that limiting children's exposure to food advertisements would combat obesity. It would, however, most certainly undermine free speech, expand the reach of the nanny state, challenge the role of parents and destroy thousands of jobs in the midst of an economic crisis.

According to the Institute of Medicine, there is no link between advertisements and children's food choices. The guidelines completely ignore the central role played by parents in making food decisions, which is evident as the word "parent" does not appear anywhere in the request for comments document. Is the government telling mothers and fathers that they are unable to take care of their children's diets, so the government should become the nanny?

Childhood obesity in America is a significant problem. Nearly 17 percent of our nation's children are severely overweight — triple the number from just one generation ago. But tackling childhood obesity cannot and should not be solved by yet another overreach of the federal government. The IAWG's proposed guidelines ignore the root of the problem by failing to address some of the other major factors that contribute to being overweight, such as a decline in physical activity.

Rather than infringing on free speech and increasing costs for business, perhaps the government should call the food police back to the precinct and work with businesses, schools, communities and parents to create common-sense ways to combat childhood obesity. We say free Tony the Tiger and Ronald McDonald and empower Americans to make good decisions for themselves and for their families.

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